

PM's Pakistan visit

Start of a more cooperative
bilateral relations

HERE are several reasons why this highest-level bilateral visit to Pakistan can be considered to be meaningful. For one thing, such visits are meant to reaffirm the fraternal ties that mark our bilateral relations, and for another, apart from the normal pleasantries exchanged, several substantive matters were on the agenda for discussion between the two prime ministers. Most of the issues, one notes happily, were related to economy and trade.

It is heartening to note that the visit has enhanced the prospect of expanding bilateral trade between the two countries, and come September this year, a bilateral FTA is likely to be finalised. That will, we hope, reduce the trade gap between the two countries that is weighted against Bangladesh, by affording increased access of Bangladeshi goods into Pakistani market. It could perhaps be surmised that the Bangladesh PM's visit may have accelerated the Pak government decision to ratify SAFTA by the end of this month.

The four MoUs signed between the two countries will not only help promote trade, a vital sector, but tourism, its immense potential of earning huge foreign exchange for Bangladesh having gone largely ignored, are hopeful, will be rescued from the doldrums that it is currently in.

We are heartened to note the coalescence of view on the most volatile of current issues, terrorism. Religious radicals have subjected both our countries to attacks in the recent past. Although Bangladesh perhaps faces a more indigenous variety of the phenomenon and Pakistan's is of a more hybrid nature, there are reasons to believe that these elements may have common motivations if not common sponsors. It will help us tackle such brand of people by sharing our expertise in this field.

We feel that the very positive note on which the visit commenced and ended must be carried forward by taking immediate steps to implement the issues that were mutually agreed upon.

Toxic laden ship

Why was it allowed to be purchased
in the first place?

IT is now reassuring that the minister for environment has told the questionable toxic laden ship shall not be allowed to enter Bangladesh waters. But why, may we ask, was a ship reportedly holding such hazardous material allowed to be purchased for the ship-breaking yards in Bangladesh at all?

For the last few days the media had been reporting on the vessel heading for Bangladesh ship-breaking yard carrying toxic cargo. Bangladesh Ship Breakers Association (BSBA) and other government agencies including the shipping authorities had been in the know of the matter.

As it is, our ship breaking yards follow very lax standards and the working conditions have proved dangerous for the workers. In 2003, a number of labourers of one of the ship-breaking yards died of toxic effects while engaged in the breaking of another such vessel. We were therefore extremely concerned of the possible repetition. Usually diseases caused by toxic chemicals are extremely dangerous, endemic in nature and are often life threatening not just for the people who come directly in contact with the substance but also for those living in the surrounding areas. Besides, the residual wastes of such vessel can be harmful to the flora and fauna of the area.

We were also confused at reports that the government was still waiting for further information on the ship. While the government decided to cancel the letter of credit of the ship's buyer it must have ensured that the vessel in question not enter the territory of Bangladesh much less berth at Chittagong port, otherwise it would create complications and we could never be able to turn it away. And this could involve us in a web of legal complications, too. All we had to do in order to understand the possible future scenario was to see the problems our neighbour India is facing with a French vessel currently berthed at Bombay Port.

Reportedly, the buyer purchased the ship flouting the advise of the BSBA. It amounts to importing dangerous material, which is an offense under our laws. Those responsible must be proceeded with accordingly.

Free and fair election -- myth or reality

The cry for reforms of the caretaker government and of the election commission is currently gaining rapid momentum among the people at large and the 14-party political alliance in the opposition. The goal has been to get a fair, free and impartial general election under a newly-constituted acceptable body.

Kazi ALAUDDIN AHMED

In recent times the policy-makers, obviously by virtue of their numerical strength in the parliament, appear to have been affording themselves unbridled leverage being utterly infatuated. They are almost forgetful of the constitutional provisions and the obligations not to make any infringement upon the normal functioning of the administrative machinery towards good governance.

The bureaucracy that we have today has been a legacy of our past masters in pre-partition India under British rule and of the Pakistani rulers between 1947 (August) and 1971, prior to emergence of Bangladesh as an independent, sovereign nation. It is easily conceivable that this bureaucracy will have to be tuned to the policies of any politically elected government.

Yet the original intention of such a bureaucratic system of administration was never planned to be any-

way partisan or biased in any manner with the political manifesto of the ruling party. A deep, noticeable and distinctive demarcation between the two entities was to be there. Here, the bureaucrats were to assume the mere role of implementers of the policies of the ruling political party(ies) without forsaking their primary identity as the servants of the state 'not of the government'. And in such an objective role of 'implementors' they would be expected to give counsels to their political 'bosses' on how best to implement the policy options. And when they would find any political decisions coming in direct clash with the constitutional provisions they would make the pointers and put their hands off with unambiguous, logically tenable note of dissension to the contrary. Such a clear borderline has been intended to keep the whole bureaucratic system free from any involvement in any controversial issues bereft of logical and legal support.

In a democracy, free and fair election is a much talked-about

phenomenon. It presupposes an absolutely free and independent election commission as per specific provisions in our constitution. Much to our utter dismay, the election commission and for that matter the CEC, precisely the incumbent in different tenures has not been always successful in evading public criticism for the apparently dubious role. It becomes all the more inexplicable when the CEC is found over enthusiastic to please the ruling party, curiously forgetful of his constitutional position per se. Thus one is apt to ridicule his own image to be jeered at even when he is not in office. Among the bad and saddest precedence we have in our view a retired justice who conducted an abortive national election in February 1996.

Subsequent to induction of a caretaker government, by and large, the role of the CEC was supposed to have been easier. Yet it didn't happen so. Doubts about his absolute neutral identity continued

veering around. The CEC in position during October 2001 election -- a civil servant (CSP originally) -- had a very difficult time in decision making, reportedly, for his inability to put up well with his two other Election Commissioners and with the erstwhile Secretary of the Election Commission (now a full-fledged EC on promotion). The outgoing CEC made a public statement before leaving, which very openly pointed to the interference of the political leadership, to which he appealed to have helplessly succumbed. He asked for a re-organisation of the Election Commission where, among others, he wanted the position of the Secretary of the Election Commission directly accountable to the CEC and EC as such and not to the Secretary, Establishment Division/Cabinet Secretary. In fact the ex-secretary of EC used to take full personal advantage of his accountability to the Cabinet Secretary often flouting CEC/ECs.

Parallel to the peculiar situation obtaining in the election commission as briefly recounted and hinted above, the role played by the caretaker government prior to 2001 national election was similarly questionable to many. Particularly, the uncalled for enthusiasm of the

head of the caretaker government seemed anything but palatable. His direct interference in the posting of 13 (or so) senior officers in different ministries and the queer initiative he took in turn to be shocking to the people. In this election the polling at different places was reportedly a one-sided game in favour of the present ruling coalition. The men belonging to the election commission were also alleged to have played second fiddle to such a gamble.

Against such a frustrating scenario and in the backdrop of a last minute revelation of the sad experience by the former CEC, the new incumbent was appointed in the name of the President of Bangladesh. Even before he could take his seat controversial reports about him appeared in the media. His first encounter with such a controversy related to the legitimacy of his appointment as CEC. It was contended by a lawyer in his plaint with the High Court that the new CEC could not hold two positions concurrently -- one as a judge in the High Court and the other, a constitutional position of CEC. All his acts and words subsequently, his plea for a dialogue with all the political parties and to balance support in his favour. The ratio eventually turned out to be 3:2 as against 1:2. The new appoint-

ees, upon assumption of office, made no secret that they were with the CEC and would place their full throated support to him. So, we have now a divided election commission with CEC numerically stronger, poised for conducting next general election.

The cry for reforms of the caretaker government and of the election commission is currently gaining rapid momentum among the people at large and the 14-party political alliance in the opposition. The goal has been to get a fair, free and impartial general election under a newly-constituted acceptable body. Curiously enough such a demand coincided with the observation of the representation of 'Troika' of EU visiting Bangladesh (25.01.06). They advised for a free and independent election, meaningful dialogue between the government and the opposition parties, religious harmony, safety of the minority community, etc. The team met LGRD Minister and the Foreign Minister to convey its message on the desirability of an absolutely free and fair election.

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Caught in the crossfire of the clash of fundamentalisms



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

This is why Muslims need to be skeptical about the war on terror and the Iraq war, as well as the latest cartoon wars. If they are not careful, escalation of these kinds of inter-cultural conflicts runs the risk of painting the non-fundamentalists into a corner from which they will not be able to escape, with catastrophic consequences for the Muslim world as a whole.

hypocritical and beside the point paeans to the concept of freedom of expression (as if there are not ideas and images that would never see light of day in western publications) and tendentious lectures about Islam's incompatibility with the values of western democracy and civilization.

On the other side, we have the Muslim fundamentalists who are eager to portray the entire western world as the enemies of Islam and those Muslims who do not sign up for the fundamentalist program as insufficiently pious defenders of the faith.

Both these sides have been empowered and have had their prejudices confirmed by the events of the past two weeks, but those who would prefer to mend fences between the two worlds, and are in favour of dialogue and understanding and inter-faith harmony have been undermined.

In this context, the furor surrounding the cartoons can be seen as merely the newest front in the clash of fundamentalisms that threatens to one day damage beyond repair relations between Islam and the west.

Right now there are two culture

wars raging in the world: one within the Islamic world and one within the western world.

The war within Islam is between the fundamentalists and the non-fundamentalists, and a principle touchstone of this struggle is how to negotiate the parameters of the relationship between Islam and the west.

The war within the west is between those who wish to engage with the Islamic world on the one hand, and those who believe that Islam is a religion and culture that represents an assault on western civilization that must be confronted both ideologically and militarily on the other.

The third war between the fundamentalists on both sides, the clash of fundamentalisms, can only be properly understood and appreciated in this context.

It is this that the fundamentalists on each side use to advance their own war against those they see as apostates to their faith. They accomplish this by using the worst excesses of the fundamentalists on the other side to suggest that the non-fundamentalists are insufficiently sensitive to the threat posed by the "other."

Commentators and politicians in the west have seized on the riots that have taken place to protest the cartoons to make their point that Islam is incompatible with western conceptions of democracy and tolerance.

The fact that there has been a strong political component to the protests that have been orchestrated and the relatively small number of those who have protested violently is conveniently brushed aside.

In the Muslim world, the cartoon issue has been manipulated by those who either want to burnish their own religious credentials to protect their right flank from the fundamentalists (see, e.g., Egypt, government) or those who wish to whip up a furor against governments and policies that they deem to be too pro-western and thus move the political spectrum rightwards (see, e.g., MMA in Pakistan).

In Bangladesh we have not seen violent protests and that is to our credit. There has been almost universal condemnation of the cartoons, but whatever protests have been registered have been peaceful enough. Last Friday, the Danish embassy was well protected

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by sensible law enforcement precautions, and as best as I can tell, Danes in Bangladesh are perfectly free to go about their business without fear.

But we will warn against complacency. The clash of fundamentalisms is a long-term problem for non-fundamentalists in Bangladesh, and it seems likely that the immediate future will be marked by further escalations by fundamentalists on either side, and this will have the effect of backing non-fundamentalists even further into a corner.

This is what we need to be concerned about and it is this space that needs to be defended from the encroachment it is suffering from both sides of the clash of fundamentalisms.

This is why Muslims need to be skeptical about the war on terror and the Iraq war, as well as the latest cartoon wars. If they are not careful, escalation of these kinds of inter-cultural conflicts runs the risk of painting the non-fundamentalists into a corner from which they will not be able to escape, with catastrophic consequences for the Muslim world as a whole.

The question that non-fundamentalists need to be asking themselves today is what actions they can take that will ensure that they are not marginalized out of existence, given the fact that provocateurs on both sides of the divide would like nothing more than to remove them from the equation.

Think about it. How long will it be before a fundamentalist, either a western fundamentalist or a Muslim one, again takes action that only confirms the prejudices of the militants on the other side? And, once again, who will be left carrying the can?

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Why cartoons animated outrage?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

Flemming Rose has recently said that his paper would publish a full page of cartoons satirizing Jesus and the Israel-Palestinian conflict to prove that it's not one-sided. Once again Flemming is showing his incorrigible capacity to miss the point. Two wrongs don't make a right. Besides, if he rips another man's clothes, it's an insult. If he rips his own clothes, it is madness, but not the same thing.

highly evolved society proved utterly naive or downright stupid. If it's the Danish tradition to satirize everyone, it's the Muslim tradition not to draw the likeness or graven images of their prophet, let alone do his caricature. Why then should the Danes show disrespect to the Prophet of Islam?

The idea was born after Flemming Rose had read that museums in Sweden and London had recently removed artworks, which their staff deemed offensive to Muslims. A Danish comedian told him that he felt free to desecrate the Bible but he'd be afraid to do the same to the Koran. Then Rose read that a Danish children's book author couldn't find illustrators who dared drawing Muhammad for a new book on Islam.

Hence, Flemming rushed where others feared to tread. He got suspicious that the art world was self-censoring out of fear of Islamic radicals, and contacted 25 Danish newspaper cartoonists with a challenge: Draw Muhammad as you see him. Twelve responded, and the newspaper printed their submissions, including one that depicted Islam's holiest figure with a bomb in his turban.

But Flemming's defiance isn't as innocent as he claims. A cartoonist named Christoffer Zierler has

claimed that the Danish newspaper which published caricatures of Prophet Muhammad had previously turned down cartoons of Jesus as too offensive. "My cartoon, which certainly did not offend any Christians I showed it to, was rejected because the editor felt it would be considered offensive to readers -- readers in general, not necessarily Christians," the cartoonist added.

The red herring of the whole controversy has been the freedom of expression, which the Danish paper claims gave it the right to do what it did. But does it mean one is free to express anything? Are people allowed to streak on the streets of Copenhagen? Is it common in the public domain of Denmark to curse each other's mothers? No offense, I am just curious to know how far the freedom of expression can be stretched so that the holiest man of a religion can be gratuitously ridiculed in defiance of the sentiments of his followers.

One must be honourable in one's exercise of freedom, and it demands that we don't say that a fat lady is fat, an ugly man is ugly, or a handicapped person is handicapped. Freedom is like breathing in the fresh air without denying others the right to do the same. Freedom is about tolerance and respect. When

it comes to newspapers, the freedom of expression ought to meet the standards of accuracy, clarity, fairness, and taste.

This is where the Danes have stumbled. Journalism is as much about courage as it is about good taste. The cartoons have been done in bad taste and I hope someday the Danish people will appreciate that freedom of expression doesn't mean to rub it in the nose of someone so that he feels offended. It's for the same reason why we don't use the "F" word in public or talk obscenities before children or elders. In the US, the word "nigger" is not used because it would hurt the sensibilities of African-Americans.

Even in advanced societies, unbridled mouth brings outrage. In the past week, The Washington Post has been bitterly criticized for publishing an op-ed piece by a leader of the terrorist group Hamas. The Post has also taken flack for a Tom Toles cartoon, which appeared on January 29, criticizing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The cartoon showed a quadriple amputee in a hospital bed, which brought a flood of protests, including a letter signed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, accusing the paper of mocking military amputees. Some of the speakers, including a former US President, are being excoriated for

it.

This is why Peeping Toms are a disgrace. This is why defamation is punishable by law. This is why desecration of holy sites is a criminal offense.

The cartoons desecrated the holiest icon of Islam to say the least, and as much as they are caught in their religious frenzy, the Muslim fundamentalists never desecrated the prophets of Christianity and Judaism because both Jesus and Moses belong to the Muslim pantheon of prophets. But then why a prophet should be dragged into the clash of baser instincts? Why should the Danish paper want to make fun of the Muslim prophet if it had turned down the cartoons of Jesus as offensive?

I would like to give the benefit of doubt to Jyllands-Posten, that it didn't have any prejudice against the Muslims, but had commissioned and printed the cartoons to make a point. Still they should have tried to understand how the Muslim psyche was going to react to such humiliation of their holiest man and could have been quick to offer apology when it was getting out of hand. There are those who blame the Danish newspaper for being insensitive and foolish, but also blame the Muslims for inordinate reaction. They are even criticizing the governments of Muslim countries for

getting involved to boycott the Danish products.

But in democracies, it's only expected that the government should yield to the will of the people. The governments of Muslim countries are listening to their people for the same reason the Prime Minister of Denmark was listening to his constituency. Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen was elected in 2001 riding on the support of the fiercely anti-immigration Danish People's Party. While the Danes take pride in their freedom of speech, Rasmussen's government passed some of Europe's toughest immigration laws, and changed speech laws to make it illegal to instigate terrorism or offer advice to terrorists.

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The Danish newspaper and other western newspapers, which reprinted the cartoons to show solidarity to it, must realize that their madness makes it difficult for the moderate Muslims who are trying to have a sobering effect on their extremist co-religionists. Coming back to economics, it's Gresham's Law equivalent of sense and sensibility. Bad sense is increasingly driving good sense out of our minds.

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